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ABSTRACT

To collect data about the first-year university experiences of rural students, 15 students were drawn from a pool of 125 Riverina (Australia) students who had participated in an earlier study on factors that influence academic persistence. The sample consisted of approximately equal numbers of males and females, about equal proportions of students residing on and off campus, and a representative mix of Australian universities. Each student was interviewed for 30 minutes and was asked 16 questions concerning perceived successes and failures encountered during the first year of university study. Among the challenges faced by first-year rural students were developing new friendships, forging an independent identity, a lack of direction from others, an intimidating large campus environment, financial pressures, and homesickness. Successful strategies for meeting these challenges included quickly initiating close friendships, residing on campus, maintaining motivation, using orientation week to full advantage, retaining contact with high school friends attending the same university, being willing to leave home setting, participating in rural student awareness programs, and deferring studies temporarily. Advice for potential university students includes being outgoing, residing on campus, being strongly committed to one's goals, being prepared to leave family and friends or staying close to home, and realizing that other students are experiencing similar difficulties. Implications for administrators and academics are discussed. Questions and responses are presented in 13 tables. (TD)

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First Year University in Retrospect: The Voices of Rural Students

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ABSTRACT

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This study provides a personal, retrospective account of the perceived successes and failures encountered by a sample of rural students during their first year of tertiary study. Collected via an interview format, their comments point to a clear set of challenges, strategies, and suggestions that may prove valuable to other rural students considering attending university as well as to those professionals charged with providing them with counselling and guidance.

Introduction

The study reported here is concerned with university student success and satisfaction during the first year of tertiary education for rural-based school leavers. This is the first time a study of this type has been undertaken in Australia. Earlier work has not addressed the specific needs and characteristics of rural students but has concentrated on large aggregated samples. The present study is a continuation of previous research which began with a cohort of Year 10 students (N=840) and followed them through to the end of Year 12 (N=340). This earlier research focused on the factors which influence whether or not students stay on at school, concluding that family background, goal and school commitment, academic and social integration, and needs accommodation affected this decision (see e.g., Hemmings & Hill, 1995; Hemmings, Jin, & Low, 1996).

In order to collect data about the university experiences of rural students, a sample of 15 students was interviewed. These students were drawn from a group of 125 Riverina-based students who participated in the original research project and progressed to university in the period 1994-1996. This time-frame was used in order to accommodate students who moved directly from high school to university, and those who deferred enrolment either for one or two years. Those students who were interviewed attended a number of universities including Charles Sturt University, the University of Melbourne, the University of New England, and the University of Wollongong.

Method

A stratified random sample of 15 students was obtained using the following criteria:

- (a) approximately equal numbers of males and females,
- (b) about equal proportion of students residing on campus and off campus, and,

(c) a representative mix of universities.

The schedule used in the 30 minute interviews was based on earlier work of McGinnis, James, and McNaught (1995) and Hemmings, Boylan, Hill, and Kay (1996) and followed the procedural guidelines suggested by Cocklin (1989). The interviewer was free to pursue particular lines of interest within the schedule as a means of developing a coherent account of an individual student's first year university experience. In most cases the reporting was retrospective. Field notes for each interview were recorded and a detailed report on each interviewee was prepared shortly afterwards by the interviewer. These reports were subjected to a content analysis (see e.g., Ellis, 1994; Hemmings & Boylan, 1992) and the results are summarised, in most instances, using a tabular form.

Results

For convenience the results are reported in terms of the key questions from the interview schedule.

Question 1: *How far have you progressed in your course?*

Table 1

Category (All references to graduation and year completion refer to the university year ending 12/96)	Number of Comments
Have graduated from a 3 year degree	4
Have completed 3 years of a 4 year degree	3
Left university after 1 year	1
Part-time student entering their last year	1
Have completed 2 years of a 3 year degree, having deferred the first year	1
Have to make up a few subjects in 1997 to graduate	1
Have completed 3 years of a 5 year programme	2
Have completed 2 years of a 4 year programme, having previously studied 1 year at TAFE	1
Have completed 1 year of university, having previously studied 2 years at TAFE	1

Question 2: *Was this university your first choice?*

60% (N=9) of the interviewees indicated that the university they attended was their university of first choice. Consequently 40% (N=6) of the students enrolled at a university which was not their first preference

Question 3: What course are you now studying?

Table 2

Course of Study	Number of Students
Primary Teaching	3
Psychology	1
Commerce	1
Tourism	1
Science	1
Physical Education Teaching	1
Technical Theatre	1
Environmental Science	1
Arts/Law	1
Business	1
Applied Science	1
Surveying	1
Veterinary Science	1

Question 4: Was this course your first preference?

The vast majority of students (86.66%, N=13) stated that the course they studied was their first choice.

Question 5: What made you choose this university in the first place?

Table 3

Specific Point	Number of Comments
Availability of course	10
Proximity	9
Reputation	6
Family/friends/ lived in university locale	5
Experience of friends/relatives	4
Positive prior experience in university setting	4
Cost	2
University in student's home location	2
Facilities	2
Friends attending same university	2
Attractive campus	2
Special admission offer	2
Accepted by the university	2
Other (single comments)	4

Question 6: Why did you choose that course of study in the first place?

Table 4

Category	Number of Comments
Interest/aptitude	14
Experience	5
Advice from others	2

Question 7: Overall, did you find the transition from school to university easy or difficult?

Table 5

Category	Number of Comments
Easy	9
Difficult	5
Unsure	1

Question 8: What challenges did you face in your first year that made the transition from school to university difficult?

Table 6

Specific Point	Number of Comments
Making friends and 'fitting in' socially	9
Living off campus	4
Decreased degree of direction from others	4
Independent living	4
Missed family and friends back home	3
Difficulty adapting to large campus	3
Conflict with room-mates	3
Financial worries	3
Heavy workload	2
Difficult course	2
Difficulty adapting to large city	2
Difficulty adapting to large lecture sizes	2
Impersonal relationships with lecturers	2
Boyfriend lived in home location	2
Job in home location	1

Question 9: What conditions helped your transition from high school to university?

Table 7

Specific Point	Number of Comments
Living on campus	6
Making close friends quickly	4
Strongly motivated to do well in university	4
Positive Orientation Week experiences	3
Had been looking forward to attending university for years	3
High school friends attended same university	3
Wanted very much to leave small hometown	3
Family/friends had explained what life at university was like	2
A rural student orientation programme	2
University studies were easier than Year 12	2
Enjoyed living in the city	2
Lived at home while attending home locale university	2
Deferred first year of university to gain work experience	1
Experience at TAFE good preparation for university	1

Question 10: How have you found study at the university compared with school?

Table 8

Specific Point	Number of Comments	Examples of Comments Made
Decreased degree of direction in university	12	"You're sort of spoon-fed in high school [but in university] you don't get taught. You're there and you learn it rather than being taught something. You're there and if you want to learn it, you can learn it if you like." "You're left to your own devices a lot [and this contributed to] my bit of a downfall first year."
Lower level of difficulty in 1st year university than in Year 12	5	"I had done a lot of work on the HSC and then the first semester [of university] was very similar to high school, so I thought 'this is easy,' and I didn't pick up the pace in the second semester when it got difficult." "I studied a hell of a lot more in high school than I did in university!"
University work much more concentrated than school work	4	"During high school, you learned something over a longer period of time... [but] with university with the beginning of each semester you learned four completely new subjects... you learn it within 13 weeks and then you do an exam and then you sort of forget about it." "At university, it's like we're sitting the HSC every six months."
University class schedule much more flexible than school	4	"You had more freedom and you don't have a set 9 to 3 timetable which was good." "Maybe I work better in regimented conditions... the freedom was really weird to cope with."
Higher level of difficulty in 1st year university than in Year 12	3	"[University was] much harder. At school I could just sort of breeze through and make things up, but I had to apply myself at university."
Impersonal relations with faculty	3	"I felt having no personal contact with lecturers being difficult at first." "[They were] just someone you passed on the campus." "... maybe it's because I'm from such a small school, but having teachers that you'd drop around and have a cup of coffee with and compared to what happens at university was just really different." "You did sense that you should only use them as a last resort."
Increased exposure/interaction with various ethnic groups	3	"It's a real eye-opener, actually, when they talk about where they're from and all that kind of thing." "[I became] a bit more socially aware."
Intimidated by large campuses and large classes	3	"And I can remember going to university for the first day thinking: 'I hate this place' [because it] was so huge." "You felt sort of intimidated by actually speaking out and I felt I don't want to say anything because everyone will be looking at me." "It was just a different atmosphere just being completely alien in this big scary campus."

Question 11: How did/do your family view your university experience?

Table 9

Category	Number of Comments
Very supportive	6
Supportive	8
Somewhat supportive	1
Not supportive	0

Question 12: During first year were there times when you felt that you might consider leaving university?

Seven students responded **yes** to this question, indicating that there were times during the first semester when they really questioned whether or not they had made the correct decision to study at university. These same students were then asked to respond to Questions 13 and 14.

Question 13: Why did you consider leaving university?

Table 10

Category	Number of Comments	Examples of Comments Made
Academic	4	"...the pace picks up a bit ... and you start to wonder if this is really what you should be."
Difficulty making friends	2	"I was a bit resentful. I felt isolated from everything... the family are pretty important to me and so are friends, and university friends are only like half-friends, they're not friends you grew up with or anything.... it's a lot different but I got through it."
Missed family and friends	2	"In Hay, the group of friends we were always with were just so close. We did everything together. There was a group of us that were inseparable and to come away from that was really hard."
Poorly structured/irrelevant course content	2	"My first year in education I felt was a waste of time." "You can't see relevance [between what you are studying and what you think you should be studying] and you just think 'I can't do it'."
Difficulty adapting to the dominant university social culture	1	"I wasn't into the university party-all-night-every-night-scene. I just wasn't into that scene at all. We were just real quiet, come-home-watch-TV kind of people." "I just thought if you don't drink, you don't fit."
Cost	1	"I just find it really hard to go to university and think that you're paying out all this money and you're not getting anything back for four years." [whereas friends are studying and making money as apprentices]
Big city/ Big university "culture shock"	1	"It was so different from high school. It was just a different atmosphere just being completely alien in this big, scary campus."

Question 14: What influenced you to stay on at university?

Table 11

Specific Point	Number of Comments	Examples of Comments Made
Determination to finish what one starts	4	"I was determined. I had a goal." "I just decided this is what I'm doing. I've already done a year of it and I might as well keep going." "I just didn't want to ever admit that I wanted to quit."
Family pressure/support	3	"I'm glad they [my parents] pushed me. I'm happy that I've persevered and got through it."
Support from friends	2	"[Without my friends with me] I wouldn't have been able to cope. I would have been back in Hay in a flash."
Enjoyed their course	2	"It was coming pretty easy and the marks were good."
Values a university education	2	"I knew more about me and the world"

NB All 15 students answered the remaining two questions.

Question 15: What sort of advice would you give about university life to a high school student from a rural background?

Table 12

Specific Point	Number of Comments	Examples of Comments Made
Be outgoing	5	"You have to be more outgoing the first week than I think you would be normally." "Chat to the person next to you [in lectures] and you'll easily make friends in all the different classes by doing that... and not to be put off by the fact that they might look very different or whatever like that." "Try everything, try to fit in with other people, don't sit back and watch and don't give up."
Live on campus in your first year	4	"I don't think I'd like uni half as much as I did if I hadn't lived on campus. Most definitely live on-campus. It's so much easier... it's sort of forced on you to talk to people and do things and always go out and do things like that"
Have goals	3	"You've got to aim for something and for me that was the degree." "[You must set out] a few goals for yourself." "If you don't know what you want to do and you end up having a go at all these different things and you don't end up specialising in any one area then you kind of leave yourself short."
Go to university	2	"Go for it!"
Realise all students are experiencing emotions similar to your own	2	"[Realise that everyone] is in the same boat [and that] they're quite happy to chat to you." "[People will] support you and help you... because they're going through the same thing."
Go to a university as close to home as possible	2	"Stay closer to home if your course allows it."
Know somebody at the university you intend to attend	1	"Try and get to know somebody that goes to that university beforehand"

Join rural student organisations	1	"[Join the] Country Students Group"
Ensure that you choose the degree that is right for you	1	"Be sure the degree they're doing is going to get them where they want to go"
Realise that university is hard work and not all fun	1	"It's not all fun and games like a lot of people think it is"
Be prepared to be away from friends and family	1	"Be prepared for the Big Bad World"
There are ways to get into university if your TER is low	1	"If you want to do something bad enough, there are ways to get to do what you want to do. I had to go the back-way [TAFE before university] to get to uni and I think a lot of kids probably don't realise there are those options in the city."
Have fun	1	"Have some fun. Don't be so hung up on doing all the work all the time. You've got a lot of freedom, which is good, and just enjoy yourself."

Question 16: *Is it a good idea for rural students attending a university outside their home location to live on campus during their first year of university?*

Table 13

Specific Point	Number of Comments	Examples of Comments Made independent living benefits
Yes, live on campus during your first year	12	"They [on-campus students] had a really good social support system [and] they had so many friends within the first six months whereas I was still making them." "[residences] take a lot of country students so there are a lot of people from similar backgrounds... going through the same thing." "...[you have] lots of new friends straight off, so you didn't have to worry about walking off to university by yourself and feeling lost." "In hindsight, it would have been good [to live on campus] because so many people in university make the best friends on campus." "You were very independent, yet you had a lot of people to confide in and it was just great. It was a very party atmosphere and I suppose for your first year that's what it should be too because you've got to meet lots of people." "Everyone's kind of got the same interests, everyone's away from home, we all discover it together so it made it much easier being in college."
No, it is not necessary to live on campus during your first year	1	"I thought I'll be out there enough [on campus], I'll go home at night and get away from the place a bit." "It would be too easy to be distracted from your work [living on campus]."
No comment	2	

NB It needs noting that the responses to this final question were made by six students who lived on campus, six who resided off campus but not at home, and three who lived at home

Discussion

The responses to the questions comprising the interview schedule, the follow-up probes, and the subsequent elaboration by interviewees provided a rich description of the first year experience in retrospect. A number of themes emerged from the interview reports. These included the kinds of challenges faced by first year university students, the ways in which these challenges were confronted, and the sorts of advice which students would offer to those contemplating tertiary studies. The themes are highlighted below.

Challenges faced by first year students

- the development of new friendships
- the forging of an independent identity
- a lack of direction from others
- an intimidating large campus environment
- financial pressures
- missing contacts with home location

Successful strategies employed and necessary conditions to meet these challenges

- quickly initiate close friendships
- reside on campus
- maintain motivation
- use your Orientation Week experience to advantage
- retain contact with high school friends attending the same university
- be willing to leave home setting
- participate in Rural Student Awareness programmes
- defer studies temporarily

Advice proffered to potential university students who want to be successful students

- be outgoing
- reside on campus as this arrangement is often a home for 'rural kids'
- show strong commitment to your goals
- be prepared to leave family and friends or stay close to home if your course permits it
- realise other students are experiencing difficulties similar to you

Implications

At a time when universities are under pressure to be more efficient and client-focused, it is important to recognise the conditions necessary to ensure a satisfactory transition from secondary school to tertiary study and thereby reduce student attrition. If university administrators and academics are to take heed of the expressed concerns of students in this study, then the following actions appear to be warranted.

Matters for University Administrators

Universities need to support students by

- 1 providing appropriate information about the nature of relevant courses such as Tertiary Awareness forums and career guidance programmes. 10

- 2 identifying the challenges and concerns university students face during their first year of study, targeting the special needs of students from rural and isolated backgrounds.
- 3 establishing programmes which support the school-to-university transition process e.g., student service orientation and tutoring, and,
- 4 promoting awareness of the sources of assistance available.

Issues for Academics

Academics need to be more aware of where their students have come from, the general concern of first year students, and the diversity of background, interest, and motivation of the student population. This means, as well as being responsible for teaching subjects, they should also set in train processes which assist students in recognising diversity and developing an awareness of both the corporate life of the university and academic traditions.

Advice to All Concerned with Student Welfare

In addition to the advice above, the results of this study suggest that it is necessary to develop a climate of openness, free exchange, and support in which students can question both themselves and the creators of the educational and social environment. This is particularly important for students from rural locations where few friends and relatives have had the opportunity of a university education.

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